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ABSTRACT

Victor Raskin's taxonomy of knowledge, based on semantics theory, is adapted and applied to composition in English as a Second Language (ESL). Raskin's classification of knowledge as linguistic and encyclopedic is converted to a continuum from textual to extra-contextual, with contextual knowledge situated between the two. Textual knowledge is that relevant to understanding of grammatical aspects of the language; contextual knowledge means the awareness of inter-sentential relationships and the cumulative impact of all preceding text on cohesion and coherence; and extra-contextual knowledge refers to the elements that exceed lexical definitions, sentential rules, and compositional principles. In ESL composition, the last category of knowledge is about the American people, their social structures, cultures, expectations, values, behaviors, and language use. One ESL student's paragraph-long writing assignment is used to illustrate the three knowledge types. It is concluded that this approach provides some assistance in classifying, examining, and remedying problems commonly found in ESL composition, particularly as students from some cultures and educational backgrounds may be expected to have more or less knowledge in each area. It is emphasized that the three categories of knowledge are not distinct but exist on a continuum. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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TEXTUAL, CONTEXTUAL, AND EXTRA-CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE IN ESL COMPOSITION

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TEXTUAL, CONTEXTUAL, AND EXTRA-CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND ESL COMPOSITION

Knowledge has been variously classified. Insofar as it is of use to the pedagogy of ESL composition, knowledge can be categorized as textual, contextual, and extra-contextual. This taxonomy is by and large based on the various models of linguistic pragmatics that rose to prominence in the last decade or two. Halliday and Hasan (1976), for instance, argue that knowledge can be seen as ideational, interpersonal, and textual from their social-semiotic perspective of linguistics. Nil Enkvist (1987) maintains that discourse analysis can be sentence-based, predication-based, or cognitive-based. Ulla Connor (1987) regroups Enkvist's classification and develops what she calls "sentence-based approach and process-centered approach" in text analysis of composition. Theorists of semantics and expanded semantics have also advanced similar taxonomy. In Victor Raskin's (1986) theory of script-based semantics, knowledge is divided into two types: the linguistic and the encyclopedic. It is Raskin's model that has provided the inspiration for the application of linguistic classification of knowledge to the ESL classroom to be presented in this discussion.

Raskin's classification of knowledge grew out of a dissatisfaction with the sentence-centered semantic theories such as generative semantics and interpretive semantics in the sixties and seventies. Commenting on the so-called "autonomous

semanticists" whose work dealt exclusively with the "semantic competence" of the native speaker while neglecting "semantic performance," Raskin points out that semantics that dwell upon sentences in isolation serves only the absolute minimum of what semantic theory must deliver. The generativists' and interpretivists' refusal to work on any information beyond the sentence boundary, Raskin argues, led to their having to spend much effort on disambiguating the sentences which were not ambiguous in the first place. This contributed greatly to the widely spread misperception of the theory as exclusively a disambiguation technique. Moreover, interpretive semantics failed to live up to its general goal of matching the native speaker's competence simply because what the native speaker has is the ability to interpret each sentence in context. A theory which can not do that in principle can not be a close enough approximation of semantic competence. For Raskin, the ability to interpret sentence meaning in isolation is only of a "linguistic" nature. Contextual meaning, derived from our knowledge of the world, had no place in the theory of interpretive or generative semantics. In order to develop a semantic theory that can account for the native speaker's ability to understand the precise meaning of any text, Raskin maintains that, in addition to the "linguistic knowledge", the speaker's "encyclopedic knowledge" should also be examined. This encyclopedic knowledge is in turn loosely composed of contextual knowledge in a storage marked as "associations" on the one hand and, on the other, non-contextual knowledge in yet another storage marked as "world knowledge." His theory of script-based semantics has thrived on

this very division of knowledge into the linguistic and encyclopedic.

In this discussion, an attempt will be made to transplant Raskin's taxonomy of knowledge from theory of semantics to ESL composition. As the first step of this application, a revision of Raskin's terms will be proposed to better facilitate ESL composition as an academic field. Meanwhile a working definition will be given to each of the revised terms. An ESL paper will then be examined and closely analyzed to demonstrate the applicability of such a classification of knowledge. Finally, a few observations will be made about the usefulness of this taxonomy in ESL pedagogy.

ESL composition as an area of instruction and research has its unique features different from areas that appear adjacent to it. Neither theories nor practice from such fields as linguistics or composition can be copied verbatim for the teaching of ESL students. The close proximity and necessary overlap among these disciplines, however, lend themselves to the enormous possibility to "borrow" whatever has been successful from one area to another. To the degree that it is beneficial to the enhancement of ESL composition pedagogy, Raskin's classification of knowledge developed in his theory of semantics can be adapted for the ESL writing classroom. Raskin's bi-stratification of knowledge, namely, linguistic knowledge and encyclopedic knowledge, appears elegantly simple and common-sensical. But when grafted for ESL composition, it may run into certain problems. With the first kind of knowledge, the problem lies in the word "linguistic."

Does "linguistic" mean "sentential" as in the case of the autonomous semantics? Or does it mean "sentence and beyond" as in linguistic pragmatics? Different domains of "linguistic knowledge" invite vastly different treatments. With the second kind of knowledge, that is, encyclopedic knowledge, the problem is the lack of a clear demarcation between knowledge pertaining to "associations" and "world knowledge." Moreover, why are items of "association" necessarily "encyclopedic" when they are, as Raskin's own examples would clearly indicate, really not of universal nature but pertinent only to the special discoursal circumstances? According to Raskin, stored in the storage of "associations" are personal pronouns, temporal and spatial references, and other specific nominals, all of which are deictic elements related to particular situations. In other words, there is nothing "encyclopedic" about these items of "associations." They therefore should belong to categories other than "encyclopedic."

Some changes are necessary in order to remedy these problems. Rather than a juxtapositional binary division, knowledge can be seen as a continuum, with the structure of the text at one end and the communal knowledge that transcends all speakers of a given language at the other end. Let us call the former "textual" and the latter "extra-contextual." In between there is the knowledge of the context, akin to Raskin's notion of "associations." Thus knowledge can be regarded as a continuum from the textual to the contextual and the extra-contextual.

Each of these three kinds of knowledge more or less pertains

to one area of cognition. By "textual" it is meant that kind of knowledge relevant to the understanding of grammatical aspects of a language. It includes, but is not limited to, knowledge of word formation and sentence structure. It also extends itself to such generic rules relating to paragraph organization, and the framing and shaping of a complete composition. The emphasis, however, remains on the sentence itself, which has been the center of linguistics and still is the major subject area of grammar. By "contextual knowledge" it is meant the awareness of inter-sentential freedom and constraints between individual sentences, and the cumulative impact of all that which precedes the current sentence in terms of cohesion and coherence. Factors directly related to a given rhetorical performance are also part of the contextual knowledge, such as the subject matter, purpose, and audience, as well as consciousness of effective rhetorical strategies in succeeding in this performance. By "extra-contextual knowledge" it is meant those elements that exceed lexical definitions, sentential rules, and compositional principles. It is that portion of the so-called encyclopedic knowledge pertinent to a given time and place, time as long as decades or even centuries and place as large as a tribe, a region, a nation or even beyond, as long as a particular language is the communal property intelligible among, and shared by, all speakers (and writers) within the boundaries of such a community. In terms of ESL composition here in this country, this third kind of knowledge is about the American people, their political, social, economic, and religious structures, their cultures, their expectations, their values, and their behavioral patterns, their

use of statements, questions, exclamations, humor, derision, and innuendo that subsume all circumstances.

To illustrate the three kinds of knowledge and how they can help us identify students' problems in writing, a paragraph is given next that was turned in to the instructor earlier in the spring semester from an ESL student. The project assignment, for which the paragraph was written, consisted of two parts. First, interview each other's partner in study pairs on his/her writing experience, attitude, and habits, and on what he or she would like to improve as a writer. Second, write a paragraph about one's partner as a writer based on the interview. Students wrote a draft version in class and came back the following week with its revision. Here is what one student wrote for the assignment (Sentences are numbered to facilitate discussion):

> (1) X's writting ability is very significance and different. (2) I was by the professor Y, Based on the facts that he stress her writting about legalization of military on woman tremendously that she deserve an A. (3) I know X's strong point and weak point on the intervew that I ooer to her. (4) I know she took a lots of practices upon her writting techniqre. (5) She does a lots of thinking; It was like brain storming her thoughts in the piece of paper before she writes. (6) She spends lots of time by organizing her thought before putting it into the paper. (7) I pay close attension to her, since she sit in front of me. (8) These are her strong point on her writting strategies. (9) On the other hand, I can tell she was a messy writer. (10) She was not sure how much time for her to take to spend on a paper like me. (11) She did not spend time to correct her grammer errors. (12) In other word, she has not proof read her writting before she turn it in to the professor. (13) I get a feeling that if she concentrate more on her grammer and organization of sentence structure she might doing well through out her courses. (14) These are the commend I made about her paper.

Before any analysis of the paragraph, some background information about the student writer will be helpful. He came to America nine years ago, received his entire high school education here in this country, and is currently a sophomore in college pursuing a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. During his freshman year, he twice took English 99, a course in developmental writing. And twice he failed to pass it. He is quite anxious to improve his writing skills because, as he puts it in his journal, his academic major requires a tremendous amount of writing. He has also verbally expressed his anxiety during conferences with the instructor.

Looking at this paragraph, one gets a feeling that the writer follows an organizational pattern generally taught in English composition classes. The paragraph begins with a topic sentence 1, which forecasts that both of X's strong points and weak points will be discussed. Sentences 2 through 8 provide evidence for X's strong points as a writer. Sentences 9 through 13, beginning with a well-chosen transitional phrase "on the other hand," support the judgment that X still has problems in writing. The paragraph concludes with a summative statement, sentence 14. This overall well-organizedness is a clear indication that the writer has received some formal training in English composition.

In the meantime, one can not help noticing problems in almost every sentence: confusion with different parts of speech in sentence 1 ("significant" vs. "significance"), lack of verbs in sentences 2 and 13, incongruity between subject and verb

in sentence 8, inconsistent use of verb tense from sentence 4 to 12, and redundance in sentence 10, to name a few. Typos and misspelled words are also too numerous for such a short piece. Faced with such a paragraph, how do we go about helping the student? Where do we start? What kind of problems warrants immediate attention and what might be dealt with later as the writer's skills cumulate? One effective way to get started on helping the student is to use the classification of knowledge into textual, contextual and extra-contextual just sketched out in the previous pages to analyze the problems in this paragraph. The following section is an attempt for such analysis.

Problems that represent the student's insufficient command of textual knowledge are numerous in this short paragraph and readily identifiable. Textual knowledge, as explained earlier, is part of the native speaker's competence in word-formation, sentence structure, and paragraph patterning, with the sentence as a matter of central concern. As a matter of competence, this knowledge is natural and automatic with the native English speaker, for all the rules regarding the well-formedness of sentences have been internalized in the process of the native speaker's language acquisition. For the ESL student, however, such rules must be learned, painstakingly. At the levels of words and phrases, the confusion of syntactic categories in 1 ("significance" for "significant"), the use of the plural for singular or uncountable nouns in 2 ("facts" for "fact") and 4 ("a lots" for "a lot," and "practices" for "practice"), and the lack of verb inflectional markers in 7 ("sit" for "sits") are of this nature. At the sentence level, we notice that the writer has

difficulty organizing complex structures. He seems able to write simple sentences well. In fact he does a fine job putting together some not-so-complicated dual-level sentences such as 6, 7 and 12. But when a sentence gets too involved, with several levels of embedding, he loses his control of structure. Sentence 2 is such an example. He probably meant to say something like this:

> I was led to think of X as a good writer by Professor Y who stressed that X's essay on the feminization of the military deserved an A.

If this is what the author originally meant, and if we share with most syntacticians in that every verb constitutes a sentence, this fairly complex mini-text will then consist of four sentences, three of which being S-bar structures. In the terminology of traditional grammar, we can readily claim two embedded clauses, one inside the other, and one infinitive phrase, with the further complication that the main verb is in passive voice. We can thus recognize the last part of the sentence "that X's essay on the feminization of the military deserved an A" as an objective clause of the verb "stressed," which in term is the head word of an attributive clause "that Professor Y stressed. . .," a clause that provides explanatory information for the "facts" (in the student's original) on which the judgment is based. Such an analysis may indeed sound heavily esoteric. And perhaps because of the over-emphasis on the technicality, grammar fell out of favor in composition classes in general for the last few decades. Although the teaching of grammar might not be of much help to regular composition students who are native speakers of English, for adult ESL students to

learn the language--as opposed to "acquiring" it--some basic grammar rules are essential. The fact that this particular student has been in school in the U.S. for the last nine years and still can not write a sentence with certain degree of complexity speaks for the opinion that just exposing our students to their English-speaking peers without additional theoretical support and reinforcing practice in using basic grammar rules will in fact delay their progress. This is particularly true with the student writer of this paragraph. He has been eager to learn the language. He clearly understands the needs to improve his writing. He understands that his ability to get his message across orally in the past will not meet the future demand of writing academic essays in various disciplines, including that of his major, criminal justice. And such a future is in fact already a reality. To survive, and to succeed in, such a new reality, he has to get back to the basics that have been neglected, back to the textual knowledge that all ESL students, particularly adult ESL students, must have a solid command of as demanded of them by different levels of communication.

Instances showing a serious deficiency in the second kind of knowledge, that of the context, are also abundant. Although the writer is mindful of transitions, as in 9 and 12, and causal and conditional relations, as in 7 and 13, he seems to have no control over the use of verb tense, a major cohesive tie in the English language. Even if some of the sentences from 3 to 13 are reasonably well structured, the lack of consistency in the use of temporal aspect creates a major breakdown in the unity of the

paragraph. The constant shift from the present to the past and back to the present without any reason is a strong indication that verb tense is not a formal device in his native language. For an adult who has grown up without being exposed to the linkage between verbs and time, he is simply not cognizant of the concept. Unless and until he undergoes some vigorous, and truly conscious, drilling on the meaning and the use of verb tense, he may never be able to use it in either his speech or writing as is naturally done by any native speaker.

The writer's lack of contextual knowledge is also evident in his inappropriate use of the plural form. Sentence 3, for instance, seems to suggest that the writer is to look at one strong point and one weak point of X whose experience as a writer this paragraph is about. In sentence 10 he again uses the singular form for X's strong point. However, the context reveals that both the strong points and weak points of X are more than one. We may once again attribute this problem to his lack of exposure to the plural inflectional marker in his native language. And once again, it is left to the instructor to detect the problem and bring it to the student's attention, not only pointing out the underpinning rules why nouns are some times pluralized and some times not, but, more importantly, also showing him the contextual constraints and connections that the plural morpheme establishes across sentences that one must consider in order to achieve contextual coherence.

Contextual knowledge, unfortunately, is even less taught than sentence grammar. Perhaps due to the elusive nature of the

term, there has yet to be a generally acceptable definition of "context" and certainly a textbook that teaches contextual knowledge and its application. Such problems notwithstanding, it seems common-sensical that context forms a major part of the writer's knowledge and is one of the primary areas that ESL instructors must help the student to cope with.

Extra-contextual knowledge, the third and last kind in this classification, is that knowledge of the writer about the universe in which his or her writing is to be produced, read, and judged. As said earlier, extra-contextual knowledge has to do with the kind of community in which English is used as a medium of communication, oral or written. And within that large community smaller sub-communities can be further identified that value certain things as opposed to others. Of the three kinds of knowledge, this one is the most difficult to teach because it is the most elusive and the least constant.

The words "significant" and "different" in sentence 1 of the paragraph suggests such a problem. Having read the whole piece, we know that the writer intends to discuss X's strong points and weak points as a writer. Our ESL author here decides to give the paragraph a a formal opening, perhaps with a tough of grand style. The result is that the collocation breaks down between "writing ability," "significance" (or even "significant") and "different." Particularly interesting is the word "different." It is not difficult to see why the writer uses this word instead of, say, "insufficient," "inadequate," "weak," or even simply "poor." In his nine years here he must have heard people say

"different" in situations in which the speaker wants to avoid embarrassment or offense by not employing any harsh or judgmental words such as "bad," "terrible," and so on. But our writer here is perhaps unaware that the word "different" in the sense of his intent is often used euphemistically and believes that it actually means the same thing as "weak" or "deficient." The explicit explanation of each and every instance of this sort of knowledge can not be found in any textbook, grammar or dictionary. The enormous quantity of ESL readers available these days that stress cultural, racial, and ethnic differences may be helpful. But reading those sample essays, whether written by peers or by professionals, can at its best only be an indirect approach to the problem. Much depends on how mindful the individual ESL student can be in his/her perception and analysis of each and every word in relation to the specifics of the rhetorical contexts, and in his ability to generate their meanings extra-contextually.

The above brief analysis of the paragraph helps to show the three kinds of knowledge, or rather the inadequate command of them, often seen in ESL student papers. Although some more precise definitions are yet to be worked out, the three kinds of knowledge, textual, contextual and extra-contextual, provide some classificatory ground to sort out problems commonly found in ESL papers. Students with different backgrounds need help in different areas. At the risk of over-generalizing and over simplification, we can assume with some degree of certainty that a Puerto Rican student, because of geographical, cultural, and political ties, will have less problem in extra-contextual

knowledge than, say, a Japanese student. Conversely, because of the numerous required language tests in order for him/her to gain entrance into a U.S. university, the Japanese student may have more textual knowledge than the Puerto Rican counter-part. Similarly, in the case of two students comparable in both textual and extra-contextual knowledge, the one who is more aware of the bondage of the context like cohesive links and constraints will usually do better than the other.

It is important to reemphasize that the three kinds of knowledge are not clear-cut separate entities, with each having well-marked territories and boundaries. As three parts--mostly distinct but sometimes overlapping--on a continuum, They more or less correspond to the levels of students' overall language proficiency: the more advanced they are the fewer problems they have with textual knowledge and the more visible their problems appear with extra-contextual knowledge. The continuum also corresponds with the degrees of ease with which each type of knowledge can be taught. Relatively speaking, it is easy to teach textual knowledge, the linguistic or grammatical aspect of writing. It grows more difficult to teach as problems become more related to the writer's knowledge of the larger structures of composing, and of the rhetorical world as a whole.

To come back to the student who wrote the paragraph, the instructor has already started working with him on the parts of speech and the formation of complex sentences, activities typically aimed at improving the student's textual knowledge. Some of his more recent papers have shown signs of progress in

this respect. At the next step, the instructor plans to work with him on verb tense, number agreement, linkage between topic sentences and supporting details, etc., elements that will help increase the student's awareness and control of contextual information. Meanwhile, of course, efforts must also be made to help the student to conscientiously learn to deal with extra-contextual differences and similarities between his first language and English. With these measures taken, the instructor is hopeful that the student author of the paragraph will find himself an improved writer by the end of the semester.

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